

Interviewer: Nick Aspinwall, commissioned by The Diplomat

Interviewee: Cofacts Team

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What has inspired you to continue contributing to and expanding Cofacts?

(Johnson)

In LINE chatrooms I am in, I would receive internet hoax and rumors from time to time. Even after Cofacts was founded, we are still faced with such messages. Cofacts makes netizens like me less stressful when faced with such hoax, because now we know a way that helps, that is contributing our effort to write Cofacts replies.

Taiwan will have a referendum towards gay marriage at the end of November. As a supporter in gay marriage, running Cofacts makes me feel that we can help when we the supporters are faced with the conservative backlash, who unfortunately have tremendous power and resources to do anti-gay marriage propaganda. Cofacts replies in this topic often received many positive feedbacks (means the LINE bot user finds the reply useful.) This really motivates me to keep working on Cofacts.

What is your average response time to news items submitted for fact-checking? Is your response rate still around 75%?

(Johnson)

For the response time, we don't have the exact numbers for now.

From my observation, when there are multiple LINE users reporting a message, the message can be replied within a day or two (except for those who that is difficult to answer, such as political opinion piece that is both radical and subjective.)

But for those messages that is not “popular”, it may take weeks or months or just being forgotten by all editors :P

In terms of the automatic response rate, it dropped to about 70 percent. The rate is derived by this formula:

Number of times the bot can find the message in database / number of times the bot receives a message.

By “find a message in database”, it can mean replied or not replied yet (but was submitted by other users already).

According to the formula and the definition above, the rate is highly related to the “variety” of received messages. If there is a message gone viral and every user is looking for the same message, the rate would rise; otherwise, the message sent to the bot will be diverse, the rate would drop, and there will be more first time messages being submitted to the database.

What's the process for vetting a prospective volunteer editor?

(Johnson)

Currently we don't have an SOP of coaching editors.

In the bi-monthly editor's meetup, we only introduces how to use the Cofacts website, then provide help and suggestions as the participants doing fact-checks on their own.

(For Johnson) At the g0v summit you mentioned public health as the most common subject of false stories. Why do you think this is?

(Johnson) what I say below is my personal opinion or hypothesis. I have not read any reports that supports this.

In the summit I mentioned that some of them are information for personal health, such as false articles that states “you cannot eat banana with milk or you will get poisoned”.

I think people forward public health messages to show care for others. In our traditional society we greet others and show care by having conversations or chatting.

Nowadays people greet using messages they found on the Internet. Content farms copy such content and create article titles that urges people to forward to show care for others; and that the cost of sharing message is way too small than doing fact checks. That is when a ritual (of sharing) becomes penetrated by false health information that is designed to be spreaded.

As for public health issue such as information about a spreading disease or epidemics, it would be more like a news rather than a handy information to share for greeting. People just spread such info out of anger.

Aside from public health, what other topics do hoaxes most commonly focus on?

(Johnson)

Freebie messages that lures people to add fake accounts as friends.

(Bil)

Recently, because of the upcoming election and referendum, we received lots messages about public policy and candidates, with persuasive opinion and propaganda.

Have the topics of hoaxes changed since you founded Cofacts - and do they reflect the changes in cross-strait relations with China?

(Johnson)

I cannot know how the landscape of misinformation of Taiwan is like before Cofacts is founded, thus I cannot know about the change.

Cybersecurity analyst Jun-deh Wu notes that successful "fake" stories always contain an element of truth. How do you draw a line between "fake news" and biased news, aside from flagging stories as "opinion" (when this may not be clear in the initial publication)?

(Johnson)

Since we allow multiple replies for each message, we are not forced to draw a line to come up with a "summarized category".

Aside from opinion, Cofacts provides editors with "contains false information" or "Contains true information" category. When it comes to a information mixed with truth and hoax, it's editor's choice to use either category and specify which part of the message their reply is referring to, or they can submit 2 replies with both categories respectively.

When it comes to biased news, editors may check if there is any factual error so that the message falls directly to "contains false information" category. If there is no factual error but provides partial information, the editor can use "contains opinion".

Do you ever explore the sourcing of fraudulent news items? For example, the recent Kansai Airport PTT post was revealed to originate from a Chinese IP address hours after it was posted.

(Johnson)

Currently we don't have such ability and functionality to explore the source checking.

On one hand, it is hard, if not impossible, to trace the source of a message from closed messaging groups.

On the other hand, it is not the source but the content that drives people to share and spread a message. Even if we can check the source, editor's still have to deal with the statements in the message content and reader's emotional reaction in their reply. That's why I would recommend the editors to focus on the message content and reply in a problem-solving manner.

How will Cofacts cope with automation in disinformation, i.e. the [bots](#) said to be employed by the CCP?

(Johnson)

Current design of Cofacts cannot deal with the “Internet army” or spammers. We are as vulnerable as PTT is, since we do allow all to become editors.

It is very difficult to balance between inclusion for everyone and prevention of malicious intent.

But when we look at PTT's case, before any measure to prevent information manipulation, the platform first becomes one of the top forum that tracks the attention of misinformation players. By the time PTT is big enough to attract such player, its community is also big enough to come up with creative counter measures like IP tracing tools and posting time analysis tools.

Cofacts surely can provide similar functionality in the future, we can also look at sites of Quora and Stack overflow to design a system that encourages good intent replies. but I think it would be too early for Cofacts to implement or design these measures.

How is Cofacts funded now, and how does the team plan to secure further funding in the future?

(Johnson)

We are funded by [g0v civic tech grant](#) in 2017. Since we are all part-time workers on the project, we currently don't have a plan to secure further funding. However, we will certainly need to take the funding plan seriously that as we dig deeper. When the time comes, we can learn from and will ask for advice from other fact-checking initiatives that also comes from a crowd-sourcing project (such as Mafindo in Indonesia and El Poder de Elegir in Colombia) about the balance of part-time and full-time workers and any other issues when turning into an organization. q

Currently, we don't have a clear timeline for that.

(For Johnson) At the g0v summit, you mentioned how you're beginning to collaborate as a "publishing platform" for the [Taiwan Fact Checking Center](#). Can you detail exactly how this collaboration functions at present?

(Johnson)

In brief, we just invite them to become Cofacts editors, as how individual fact-checkers like [Rumtoast](#) and [MyGoPen](#) has done.

These local fact-checkers have their own source of hoax information, and they generate great fact-checking content, but they want their work to be seen. Putting their report in Cofacts replies' reference is a good way for them, since the Cofacts users will end up reading their report when the users do receive such messages.

Currently we can see when Taiwan Fact-checking Center (TFC), Rumtoast and MyGoPen publish fact-checking reports, they do come to Cofacts and reply, such as:

- TFC: <https://cofacts.g0v.tw/reply/4Doc0WUBbZnN2I-Eip3Y>
- TFC: <https://cofacts.g0v.tw/reply/5DqxVmUBbZnN2I-EA5t5>
- Rumtoast: <https://cofacts.g0v.tw/reply/AVuuSI2-yCdS-nWhuYJc>
- Rumtoast: <https://cofacts.g0v.tw/reply/ITq8E2UBbZnN2I-EjZva>
- Rumtoast: https://cofacts.g0v.tw/reply/ax54JmQBSH_MLFhlz2bD
- MyGoPen: <https://cofacts.g0v.tw/reply/mzqydWUBbZnN2I-E75xO>
- MyGoPen: <https://cofacts.g0v.tw/reply/AVxjFEoVyCdS-nWhuZtB>

The editors from individual fact-checker use their own name on Cofacts. In the future, we plan to provide website owners to apply for “organization accounts” -- after we verified that a user really owns a website, they can create an “organization account” on Cofacts, and they can write replies under such account. For instance, Cofacts users can then see a reply is written by “tfc-taiwan.org.tw” so that the replies from website owners (such as individual fact-checkers or fact-checking organizations would stand out from other replies).

Do you hope to pursue collaboration with the government in the future, e.g. the Executive Yuan's fact-checking website?

(Lucien)

Yes, we would like to collaborate with the government. However, as an open source civic tech project, we want to keep our open, independent, and credibility in the public, which means we don't want to be the specific organization's megaphone. What we expect is government provide their fact-checking result as one of our data source and link their result to collected messages. Because lots of messages related to government policy and data, it's hard that civics fact-check as fast and precise as government. We hope that people can gather the government's and the public's voices in our platform at the same time.

In the *Taipei Times* interview you mentioned the government would never create a law to penalize free speech - but it has considered legislative responses to "fake news," proposing [the addition of a clause](#) to the Social Order Maintenance Act and, more recently, [amending the National Security Act](#). What do you think about such ideas?

(Lucien)

As we know, these proposal is just initiated in the very early phase. The public has negative reaction to those proposal. Besides, they're lots process to edit clause in the law. Considering the Taiwanese civic literacy and freedom speech environment, we are optimistic to those proposal would not be real. Furthermore, if those proposals have been approved, how to execute in the real world is the another problem. If you want to real track all spreading path on the internet, the government has to change laws to access people's privacy data. That needs more amendment of law. Hence, if governments want to execute the penalize to spread fake news, they have to conquer lots process barriers.

PTT recently suspended new user applications due to fears of the spread of disinformation. For those of you who use PTT, do you think the community can stem the spread of fake news itself?

(Lucien)

Yes, the community can stop spreading fake news by appropriate mechanism. The community fasten the messages spreading whether truth or fake. If you have a way to mark doubt messages and incentive people to discuss and fact-checking on that, you can have a organic and strong fact-checking service by crowd.

How active are you on social media? Do you often share news via LINE, PTT, and other platforms yourself?

(Bil)

I usually use social media to browse news and information, more than an hour per day. But I seldom share news via LINE; I prefer to chat with someone by texting rather than share links. I noticed some of my relative forwarding news via LINE if they have similar opinion with the news they viewed.

How has your role as an editor altered your perception of the media?

(Hazel)

Since join Cofacts' project, I understand that misinformation not only come from media agency but lots of different content website.

(Bil)

I would be more and more considerate of why most news platform or media produce these article on internet, of course they don't mean to be misleading, but there's still room for improvement.

What would you tell news consumers to do once receiving a questionable news story (aside from submitting it to Cofacts, of course)?

(Bil)

Never trust rumors on internet or...the link sent by your friends. Those health-related online rumors and disinformation won't help anyone but increasing problem with knowledge spreading. We encourage everyone would realize more about media literacy, starting to be suspicious of stories and searching for probable reason and source ; therefore everyone would have the ability to verify information.